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CAN MEDITATION REALLY BE EFFORTLESS?

by Peter Russell



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You may be surprised to hear that meditation should be effortless, that no striving or concentration is needed. I know I was.

When I first became interested in meditation, back in the mid-sixties, I was repeatedly told that it took great mental discipline and many years of practice. Indian teachers had likened the mind to a wagonload of restless monkeys that needed to be tied down and kept quiet.

And my experience appeared to confirm it. My mind was full of thoughts, and try as I may, I could not keep them at bay. Like many others, I naturally assumed that I was not trying hard enough; I needed greater mental discipline, not less.

However, a quiet mind is not a state of mind to be achieved. It is the state we experience when there is nothing to be achieved. It is the mind in its natural condition, untarnished by fears and desires, and the thoughts they create. When everything is OK in our world, we feel OK inside; we are at ease.

Or rather, that is the way it should be. Yet, even when all our physical needs are met, and there is no immediate threat or danger, we seldom feel at ease. More often than not, the very opposite. Leave us with nothing to do, and most of us start getting bored. If someone upsets

us, we may hold a grievance for days, weeks, or even years later. Or we may spend hours worrying about situations that could occur, but seldom do.

Along with such feelings come an almost endless procession of thoughts. Most of these thoughts boil down to worries about how we can be more content; yet, ironically, a worried mind is, by definition, discontent. This is the sad joke about human beings. We are so busy worrying whether or not we are going to be at peace in the future, we don't give ourselves the chance to be at peace in the present.

Given how easily such thoughts spring up, it is easy to assume they must be subdued and controlled. But that approach stems from the same belief that created them—the belief that we need to be in control of things in order to feel at ease.

Thus, the advice that occurs repeatedly in a variety of meditation traditions is:

1. When you realize you have been caught in a thought, accept the fact. Don't judge or blame yourself. It happens, even to the most experienced meditators.
2. Instead of following the thought, as you might in normal life, gently shift your attention back to some experience in the present moment. In TM that may be the thought of a mantra, in mindfulness the sensation of the breath, or in other practices perhaps a visual image, or a feeling of love.
3. Let the attention rest in that experience. Don't try to concentrate or hold it there. Ah yes, you will be sure to wander off again. But the practice is not so much learning how to stay present, but how to return to the present. If you wander off a hundred times that is a hundred opportunities to practice gently returning your attention to the present.

Even then, trying and effort can arise in subtle ways. "Maybe if I just added this or focused on that, it would be easier." Some of it is so subtle that we don't even notice we are doing it. A faint resistance to an experience perhaps. Even a slight wanting to have a good meditation can get in the way.

Recently, I've been exploring ways to weed out and dissolve even the subtlest levels of wanting, effort, and expectation in meditation. Encouraged by the enthusiastic response to these new approaches from both complete beginners and people with many years of practice, I am now including them as a fundamental part my meditation teaching.